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TEN YEARS OF CHALLENGING AFRICA

Rae Gourlay / Lagos

When a handful of people carried a bathtub through steaming streets to the local post office in Lagos, Nigeria, in July 1951, no one paid much attention. Perspiring in the heat of West Africa's humid coast, they emptied their precious cargo on the counter - first copies of a new Christian magazine.

"I'll eat my hat if you reach five thousand circulation," one veteran missionary said, expecting the magazine to fold within a month or two. With a completely new and untried formula, the venture was definitely a gamble for God.

Today, ten years after that unheralded beginning, the African Challenge is read by half a million people. As the pioneer mass-circulation evangelistic magazine of its kind, it has been the inspiration behind the starting of similar publications in South Africa, East Africa, Congo, Hong Kong, Japan, India, and the West Indies.

No one in 1951 could have forecast the turbulent events in the African continent in the ten years to follow. Nationalism reached fever pitch. Countries which had shown little progress for centuries suddenly demanded freedom from colonial rulers, until in 1960 no less than 18 African states received their independence.

With the rise in literacy came a flood of literature - from the subtle propaganda of Communism (four pieces for every African in the past few years) to the confusing claims of cults and "isms", and the lurid trash of the western world.

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Realising the traditional "churchy" magazine would have little appeal to Africa's young literates, the Sudan Interior Mission, an interdenominational society serving in Africa since 1893, decided on a bold new plan to produce a "popular-style" journal.

The African Challenge was aimed at the man in the street, presenting the gospel message through topical news features and African testimonies. As they listened to reports of first sales on West African newsstands, the editors knew that the magazine had made a hit.

Headmasters and teachers, too, were quick to realise the educational value of African Challenge. They use it to teach English, General Knowledge, and Religious Knowledge, often making it compulsory reading material for students. "Write a precis on any article from African Challenge," was a question that appeared in the entrance examination of one teacher training college.

Coupled with the aim of winning men and women to Jesus Christ, the Challenge is also concerned with building up the churches. Realising that a tragic lack of solid teaching is behind the weakness and ineffective witness of the Church in many parts of Africa, the editors provide simple Bible study in which doctrinal subjects - normally too "heavy" reading for new literates - are broken down into simple, basic thoughts easily grasped by schoolboys.

Pastors, often without commentaries or other Bible aids, are helped to find sermon material. Recent issues of African Challenge give advice on how to hold a street meeting, run a Sunday school, use visual aids, and conduct family worship.

In a strife-torn continent, it is the young people who suffer most. Even in the few countries of Africa which are quiet politically, there is a silent revolution taking place in the smallest village. Old standards and ways of life are crumbling, and in their place is a spiritual vacuum in which young folk are confused. In their search for a new set of values, it is sadly true that they often turn to the worst that the West can produce - through films and sordid literature.

It is here that Challenge is able to provide vital instruction - often treating "delicate" subjects with a straightforward approach that would be impossible or inadvisable in European countries, but which is the only language understood in an uninhibited continent. Articles like "How to Live a Pure Life" and "The Evils of Immorality" bring a big response from readers. Young people write in for advice on choosing their life partner and other personal problems, genuinely seeking the Christian answer. "The African Challenge has been a literal preacher to me," wrote one student from Uganda. "It frankly condemns immorality - the most common sin among young men in Africa today. Because of this, the Challenge is the most valuable paper to me."

Another method of building up young Christians in their faith came about almost by chance! An African pastor wrote to the editor in 1953 to say that he was using the magazine to provide study material for his young men's Bible class. "We call ourselves an African Challenge reading unit," he added. His letter was published, and soon people were writing in from all over Africa to ask how to start their own branches. Today there are over 300 African Challenge Reading units scattered across the continent - from Nigeria and Ghana in the West to Ethiopia and Kenya in the East. Meeting monthly in schools and training colleges, homes and churches, members first hold Bible study and prayer before going out to witness for Christ in villages and assist local churches.

Each issue of the African Challenge includes an "enquiry slip", which readers are invited to fill in if they wish to receive Christ as Saviour or learn more about the Christian life.

A full-time counsellor and two assistants deal with the flood of readers' letters - two and three thousand each month. An average of 200 per month write in a second time to confirm their decision for Christ, in response to a follow-up letter. Readers who profess salvation are encouraged to enroll in a Bible study correspondence course.

Today the African Challenge, along with its sister publication Yoruba Challenge, is housed at the Niger-Challenge Press in Lagos, part of the S.I.M.'s larger literature programme. Fifty-seven Nigerians work alongside missionary colleagues in every department of Christian literature production. Each issue of the African Challenge is born in prayer as members of the editorial planning committee (all Nigerians, with a missionary for liaison) bow for guidance, and commit every detail to the Lord. Presses stop daily as the entire staff meets for prayer.

For ten years the Lord has blessed the African Challenge, providing - often miraculously - the heavy subsidy funds needed to keep the magazine within the reach of the masses. Dedicated to the spiritual and educational enlightenment of the African continent, its mission is far from complete, as this letter from a nationalist in the Cameroons emphasises: "I am writing for prayer for Africa's free states and those still under colonialism, through our most strong Christian organ, African Challenge. At this height of confusion in Africa we need God's guidance."

"The African Challenge has truly challenged our minds and hearts," said another African - Sir Francis Ibiam, Governor of Eastern Nigeria, and one of the nation's best-known Christians.

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After receiving this contribution from Miss Rae Gourlay we asked her several questions, which, together with her answers, are given below.

"1) Could you give the exact wording of the 'enquiry slip' to which you refer on page 3; could you quote two or three of the average letters in which people 'confirm their decision for Christ' or 'profess salvation'?

2) What answer would you give to someone who, because of his deep concern for evangelism in Africa, would ask you whether the 'enquiry slip' actually meets the man whose decision is requested, or (in other words) whether this decision or profession of salvation is made as a decision or profession which comprehends the whole life of the man who decides?

3) What happens to the man who decides for Christ after his decision, with regard to his Church membership?"

(Dr. Hans Jochen Margull)

"The 'enquiry slip' always comes at the end of an article in which the Christian faith has been explained. For example, in the April issue, after a two-page article on Rafer Johnson, the American Negro Olympic decathlon champion, the cut-out coupon read:

'Were you surprised to read that Rafer Johnson counted his faith in Jesus Christ more important than his worldwide fame? This athlete knows that his happiness does not depend on his success in sports; he has found all that he needs in Christ. Have you found this truly happy life through faith in Jesus Christ? If you want to know more about the peace and joy that can be yours through believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, write to the Challenge Counsellor....'

To those who returned this slip, a letter explaining the three steps of salvation (repentance, confession, faith) was sent, calling upon the recipient to make a definite act of faith. Typical of replies received are the following extracts:-

From a schoolboy:

'My decision to accept Christ is that Christ suffered a lot for our sins, but I did not know about that. As I became a schoolboy I started hearing about Christ's sufferings and I want to give Him my heart....'

From a secondary schoolgirl:

'My decision is: Before God I confess that I am a sinner. I now come to Jesus and accept Him as my personal Saviour. I thank the Lord for dying for me and bearing away my sin. I believe that Jesus rose again from the dead. I will confess Him before men as my Lord. I desire from today on in everything to seek the approval of my Lord. I pray that the Lord should help me to understand Him, and belong to His great family.'

From a Ghanaian:

> 'In your letter you wrote, 'How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation.' Again I may not know what may happen to me at any time. I have thought it over, and now I have opened my heart for Him to be my Master.'

To these a further letter is sent, with advice on prayer and Bible reading. 'Join a church, if you do not already belong to one', the letter urges. 'To come together with fellow-Christians strengthens our faith and builds up a strong witness for the Lord.'

In these ways converts are built up in their faith after the initial step. They are shown that the Christian life is a continuous and practical thing - something embracing the whole of life. They are taught to rely upon the real Counsellor - God's Holy Spirit."

(Rae Gourlay)

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